

Rare, medium, well done or cloned?

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Would you eat a steak from a cloned beef cow? In two years' time you may be able to do exactly that.

Meet Le Martres Celest, the Limousin Stud beef cow feeding her foster calf in the NSW sunshine. The calf doesn't have a name, just a number until she's weaned.

In two months, 17 surrogate cows will be implanted with seven-day embryos called blastocysts, made from DNA from the ear of Celest, which was placed inside an egg from which the existing DNA had been removed. For the moment they remain frozen in liquid nitrogen.

More than half of the surrogates are likely to produce calves just like Celest. In fact, exactly like Celest.

The science has come a long way in almost 20 years and Celest's owner, Leon Martin (who doesn't use the word clone), expects to be commercially producing cloned beef for the supermarkets in two to three years. The calves will be raised by standard production - no differently from the other calves in the field at the Le Martres Limousin Stud in Table Top on the NSW-Victoria border.

Mr Martin says he is very aware of concerns with genetically modified products and he believes the science involved "stands on the right side of that line" as being ethical.

"We have alternate technology so that for the donor there is just a small prick in the ear with no injections or interference with her natural breeding program. There is also improved reliability in the outcomes of the embryos," he said.

"It is more cost effective than the original system and, in my opinion, it will be readily adopted in commercial farming."

He is confident the technique will be adopted and accepted commercially and with the public.

"I do mostly natural breeding with my cattle. I've used artificial insemination, I've used embryo work in the past. This is going to give me much more precisely the outcomes I want.

"The word cloning has a history and it's one I avoid. Cloning to me is more where they take embryos and split them to create two. This is the development of an embryo in its own way as an individual."

A spokeswoman for Food Standards said food from cloned animals, or progeny, does not need pre-market approval in Australia or New Zealand. "However, if this food was to enter the food supply it still has to comply with the state and territory food laws and obviously with relevant standards in the code,"

she said.

Bob Phelps, director of Gene Ethics, said cloning was not the trouble-free bonanza some farmers believed it to be and said "most cloned animals were stillborn, deformed, chronically ill or short lived".

"University surveys show most Australians are extremely uncomfortable with eating genetically manipulated foods, especially animal products, so cloned meat is unlikely to find a market," he said.

The laboratory part of the process has been carried out by Melbourne-based bio-consultant Dr Andrew French who is in Uruguay conducting similar work on equine and bovine embryos. He said early use of the technology showed some calves were born with abnormalities that hindered adoption of the technique on a commercial scale. "However continual development has enabled us to repair the problems and select more viable embryos," he said. "This technology does not replace traditional breeding rather it preserves and enhances valuable genetics and allows the production of a herd with more uniform characteristics."

CAPTION(S):PHOTO: Leon Martin with Celest the Limousin cow. Photo: Elenor Tedenborg

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